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ABSTRACT

This paper examines classroom dynamics that can lead to adolescent girls doubting their ability, creativity, and importance. Before children even start attending school, girls have learned verbal and physical self-restraint, thus requiring teachers to give more attention to boys who are more difficult to control. At school, intelligence is associated with the personality characteristics of independence, self-confidence, and adventuresome interests, and boys are more free than girls to publicly manifest these characteristics. Girls learn to present themselves as modest, self-deprecating, passive, and obedient while boys learn to be self-assertive and self-promoting. Children's understandings of themselves get constructed through significant adults' (e.g., teachers') understandings of them. There are many things teachers can do to support the development of girls' gifts in the classroom. Strategies include: offer assignments that invite more self-expression; research students' related interests before beginning a unit on a particular topic; challenge myths about gender; facilitate class dialogue about girls and boys being able to be friends; and have students work in mixed-sex groups. (JDD)

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Supporting Giftedness in Girls in the Classroom

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Overview: The classroom is a place where girls can learn to doubt their own ability, creativity, and importance. The session begins with a presentation of research findings (my own and others') which illustrate the dynamics and manifestations of this trend. Time is provided for small group conversations about these dilemmas in our own work sites. The final part of the session offers instructional strategies which can contribute to the alleviation of some of the difficulties girls can experience in the classroom.

In a Toronto school, a teacher asked 14 and 15-year-old girls in a gifted program to answer the question: "How would being gifted boys be different from being gifted girls?" The girls had been in gifted programs for a number of years. They provided the following answers:
Boys overestimate themselves. Girls underestimate themselves. Boys brag more. The boys normally want more attention in class. Some of the boys feel they have to rebel. It seems as though it's something special when guys make it into the gifted program but it isn't for girls. It is more expected of boys to be gifted than it is of girls. The female teachers especially favour the boys.

I'd like to provide an examination of the classroom dynamics which can lead to the state of affairs described by these 14 and 15-year-old girls. The story of course begins before children even start attending school. When they first arrive they have already learned a lot about how to be a girl and how to be a boy. An important aspect of this for girls is learning verbal and physical self-restraint. Thus children come to school with girls already more compliant while boys can be more difficult to control. Given this situation it makes sense that teachers may center topics and activities around boys' interests and may have to attend more to the boys. Given this situation girls learn to wait for attention, to

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become even more passive, and to learn to accept encroachment onto their access to resources.

Teachers' perceptions of boys and girls are very important. Children's understandings of themselves get constructed through significant adults' understandings of them. In our society "intelligence" is associated with the personality characteristics of independence, self-confidence, and adventuresome interests. Boys are more free than girls to publicly manifest these characteristics. In our society women also learn to be protective of the male ego. Thus when boys turn in sloppy, incorrect, or incomplete work, teachers tend to express support, confidence and encouragement and to offer more attention. Meanwhile, when compliant and able girls turn in tidy, correct, and complete work, the effort required for this can go unacknowledged and their good work can come to be taken for granted. Thus even when girls are doing well, nobody tells them and so they don't learn to believe that they are. Further, the modest, social, or domestic interests expressed in girls' work can be seen as less creative than boys' action/adventure oriented interests. Through all of this boys can learn to trust their own judgement while girls can learn to doubt theirs.

Throughout school girls can learn to present themselves as modest, self-deprecating, passive and obedient while boys learn that the space for their self-assertion and self-promotion is more generally and safely available. The pressure on girls comes from both the boys and adults. Thus girls can learn to not reveal the multidimensionality of their personalities, fail to learn how to hold the floor, and refrain from offering their "bright ideas" about how to do things better for fear of being seen as "interfering busybodies". Since they're hiding who they are and what they know, they can't receive praise for these things and develop

confidence and public skills. Girls can learn that the safest ways to get positive attention are through modest, self-deprecating, helpful activities. The social codes for male and female behavior are very strong and most children learn them well. The resulting classroom behaviors can serve to reinforce teachers' more positive expectations for the boys.

The net effect of a few years in the classroom is that girls can learn to doubt their ability, creativity, and importance. Even academically capable girls can fail to perceive their academic strengths accurately or experience satisfaction from their successes -- instead they focus on what they perceive to be their shortcomings. No one has enabled them to believe that they're really good at something and that this is really important. Only the criticisms have been heard.

One of the most important things too many girls learn in the classroom is that silence is a safe place. What they fail to learn are the personal practical skills of speaking on behalf of themselves, their ideas, or their concerns in the public space of the classroom.

There are many things we can do to support the development of girls' gifts in the classroom. Each classroom has different opportunities and constraints for this. Each teacher has his/her own creativity to bring to bear with these issues. I offer just a few strategies that may be helpful with this.

1. Offer assignments which invite more self-expressivity on the part of the children, that is, an opportunity for the child to combine a personal interest with the curriculum in their work. For example, after studying the "forest" in 2/3, invite children to design a forest home for their favourite Halloween character. Assignments which have some open-endedness and allow space for children's expression of their own knowledge, experience, talents, and interests help us to see more of each child's

uniqueness through their work. If all children's work is pretty similar due to the structure of the task, it is more difficult to notice and comment on each child's specialness.

2. Research students' related interests before beginning a unit on a particular topic. For example, before beginning a unit on the prime minister and federal government, a teacher asked her students to write a story beginning with "If I were Prime Minister . . .". She studied the stories and noted which social issues were written about by boys only, girls only, and by both girls and boys. This enabled her to plan unit activities with the interests of both girls and boys in mind.

3. When students express mythologies about gender, for example that all boys are better athletes than all girls, challenge these myths with their own realities. Talk about how children's abilities and interests/activities don't have to be restricted to appropriately gender-coded ones. Tell them that they can keep all parts of themselves as people: their interests, their compassion, and their ambition.

4. Facilitate class dialogue about girls and boys being able to be friends without either romantic or sexual overtones. This is highly appropriate when they start talking about so-and-so "loving" so-and-so while the children referred to respond by insisting that they hate each other.

5. Having students work in mixed-sex groups also enables them to relate to each other as people with a variety of gifts and skills. Don't tolerate boys saying that "girls are yicky" any more than you would tolerate a child throwing a banana peel on the floor.

Note: This outline of the presentation is based on a lengthier paper entitled, "'If I were a boy . . .': Constructing knowledge about gender issues in preservice education" which will be published in *Curriculum Inquiry*.